

OBSERVATORY OF ILLICIT ECONOMIES IN SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

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Summary highlights



Western Balkan criminal groups are important players in the Netherlands.

Organized criminal groups from the Western Balkans have become major players in cocaine trafficking through Dutch ports. In the Netherlands, Balkan groups are also involved in the import of heroin and weapons, human trafficking, indoor cannabis cultivation and the export of synthetic drugs. The law enforcement response is constrained by limited resources and a lack of expertise in identifying Balkan criminal networks. Addressing the challenge of Western Balkan criminality in the Netherlands will require enhanced international cooperation, improved detection technologies, increased funding for law enforcement and stricter measures against money laundering activities.



Balkan criminal groups are taking advantage of instability in Ecuador.

Over the past few months, violence perpetrated by armed gangs has brought Ecuador to a level of instability that resembles a civil war. Some of this violence can be attributed to gangs with links to foreign criminal actors, including from the Western Balkans. At the same time,

the increased instability and the attention focused on organized crime could increase risks to some of these actors who thus far have been able to operate with relative impunity.



Montenegrin criminal groups expand their reach into Africa.

Criminal groups from the Western Balkans are known to be active in Latin America, smuggling cocaine into Western Europe. But there is growing evidence that regional groups, notably from Montenegro, have also made inroads into western and northern Africa, smuggling cocaine, hashish and fuel. We look into evidence of this trend and the challenges of responding to it.



The Western Balkans is still the criminals' choice for weapons.

Despite the war in Ukraine and the large amount of weapons flowing into the country, the Western Balkans still appear to be the criminals' choice for weapons in Europe – for the time being. This article examines the latest trends in arms trafficking in the



Western Balkans and discusses the possible impact of the war in Ukraine on the criminal market.



Serbian police crackdown disrupts smuggling of migrants, but for how long?

Between mid-2022 and late 2023, there were violent clashes involving migrant smugglers near the border between Serbia and Hungary. In late 2023, Serbian security forces launched a major crackdown on

smugglers in the border region. Rather than stopping the flow of migrants, this has instead displaced them, pushing many towards Bosnia and Herzegovina. This points to the need for greater regional cooperation, as a crackdown in one country simply pushes the market to another. The situation calls for closer coordination between the Western Balkan countries and their EU neighbours, while ensuring the safety of migrants and respecting their human rights.

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

Since the publication of the report 'Transnational tentacles: Global hotspots of Balkan organized crime' in July 2020, we have been tracking the activities of criminal groups from the Western Balkans abroad. In this issue, we focus on three cases where criminal groups from the region have been active in recent years: the Netherlands, Ecuador and parts of Africa. These examples illustrate the growing involvement of Balkan criminal groups in some of the world's hotspots for illicit activity. Research for these articles is facilitated by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)'s network of contacts with local investigative journalists, as well as close cooperation between regional observatories of illicit economies, namely South Eastern Europe, West Africa and Latin America.

While much attention has been paid to drug and migrant smuggling in the Western Balkans or to groups from the region, less attention has been paid to arms smuggling. As part of the GI-TOC's analysis of the risks of firearms trafficking from Ukraine, in this issue we show that the Western Balkans remain the main source of illegal

weapons in Europe. At present, weapons are still cheap and plentiful in the region, and stockpiles have been augmented by inflows from Turkey via Bulgaria, particularly of gas and alarm guns. More on this topic can be found in a forthcoming GI-TOC report on trends in arms trafficking from the Ukraine conflict.

For several years, the Observatory of Illicit Economies in South Eastern Europe has been monitoring and reporting on the modalities, routes and markets of migrant smuggling in the Western Balkans. In this issue, we report on a major crackdown by Serbian authorities in late 2023 on increasingly violent smugglers operating along the border between Serbia and Hungary, and examine how this has displaced migration flows towards Bosnia and Herzegovina.

We welcome your feedback and suggestions for new stories. If you would like to get in touch or if you have an idea for a story, please contact Vanja.Petrovic@globalinitiative.net.

Western Balkan criminal groups are important players in the Netherlands.

From stashes in apartments, to garages, concrete panels and false compartments in cars, recent seizures of cocaine from Western Balkan gangs that exploit busy ports in the Netherlands and distribute across Europe are emblematic of the country’s unwanted status as an epicentre for drug trafficking.¹ The flourishing trade and violent competition surrounding cocaine, in particular, has even prompted the chairperson of the Dutch Police Union to describe the country as an emerging narco-state.²

Criminal organizations based in the Netherlands with transnational connections have become central, especially in managing the import of cocaine from South America into Europe.³ As an individual familiar with Albanian organized crime explained, ‘Albanians have a strong presence in drug trafficking in the Netherlands. They have established efficient networks, including specialized groups that pick cocaine from ports, a

service highly valued in the criminality environment. Cocaine is their primary focus and, to a lesser extent, they are also involved in synthetic drugs and cannabis production.’⁴ Criminals ship the bulk of their cocaine from Ecuador and Colombia through the ports of Rotterdam and Vlissingen in the Netherlands, and Antwerp in Belgium (see Figure 1).⁵ ‘Everything goes through Rotterdam. It has an excellent network for activities and great transportation connectivity,’ said a person knowledgeable about Serbian organized crime.⁶ Criminal groups from the Western Balkans, with direct links to South American cartels, manage an estimated one-third of all cocaine imported to Europe, relying on these kinds of networks.⁷

In addition to the cocaine trade, Western Balkan criminal groups are also involved in importing heroin and weapons, human trafficking, indoor cannabis cultivation and exporting synthetic drugs.

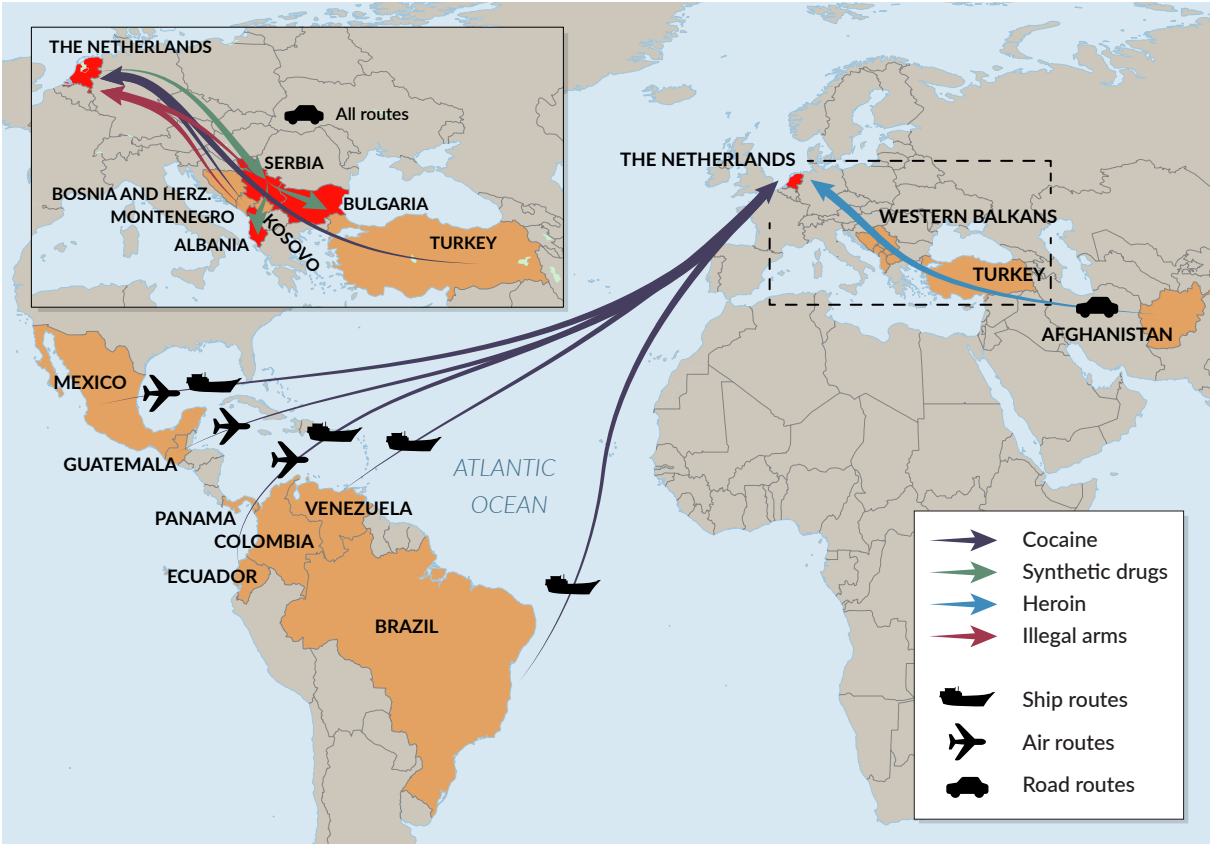


FIGURE 1 Key routes connecting criminal groups from the Netherlands and the Western Balkans.

Source: See footnote⁸

THE DUTCH ORIGINS OF SYNTHETIC DRUGS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Illicit substances such as MDMA (ecstasy), amphetamine and methamphetamine are produced in the Netherlands (particularly in North Brabant and Limburg provinces⁹) and exported all over Europe, including to the Western Balkans.¹⁰ In Serbia, for example, most of the amphetamine on the market comes from the Netherlands.¹¹ Precursors are imported from China and

Mexican ‘cooks’ are involved in the trade.¹² Production is reported to have increased in 2023, becoming what a senior Dutch police officer referred to as ‘factory production of narcotics’.¹³ Ecstasy is also increasingly exchanged for cocaine in South America, where consumer demand for synthetics is rising.¹⁴

Attraction of the Netherlands to criminal groups

The Netherlands offers several advantages for Western Balkan criminals, including its geographic location, infrastructure and trading position.¹⁵ It also has a ‘great judicial system, especially regarding human rights and the right to defence, and a liberal approach to drugs and punishments for these crimes. Just look at the Gačanin agreement,’ said a person well-versed in Serbian organized crime, referring to the lenient sentencing of major drug dealer Edin Gačanin.¹⁶ Despite being relatively small, the Netherlands is Europe’s largest maritime freight transport country and a global trading hub.¹⁷ Its largest port, Rotterdam, is the 10th biggest container port in the world: yearly, approximately

467 million tonnes of freight are brought into Rotterdam port alone.¹⁸

The same efficiencies that make Dutch infrastructure attractive to licit companies are also attractive to criminal actors. Additionally, the high volume of trade makes it difficult to detect contraband among tens of thousands of containers. According to the last available data, the Netherlands had a turnover in 2022 of more than 14.7 million containers (see Figure 2), of which only tens of thousands were scanned.¹⁹

Dutch customs authorities did not want to disclose the number of scanned containers due to an ongoing

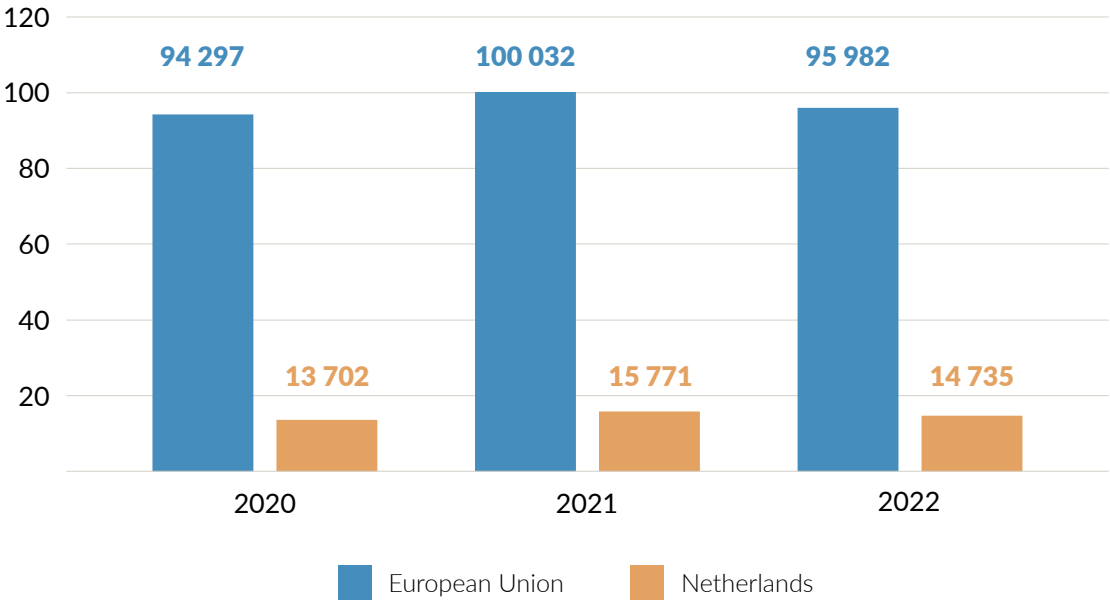


FIGURE 2 Volume of containers handled in the Netherlands and the European Union, in TEU (x 1 000).

Source: Eurostat

investigation. However, in 2022, the newspaper *De Volkskrant* reported that 55 000 were scanned.²⁰ Only 467 containers were physically inspected by the Hit and Run Cargo Team, a collaboration between customs, the tax authorities, seaport police and the prosecution.²¹ Corruption among port and scanner workers is also a problem, creating an ideal setup for smuggling drugs.²²

Drugs are often hidden in fruit shipments: in 2023, for example, Dutch customs intercepted a €90 million cocaine shipment hidden in a container of bananas from Ecuador.²³ And the trade is increasing, according to the police: in total 176 000 kilograms of cocaine were intercepted in 2023.²⁴

Criminals use various methods to circumvent control by Dutch authorities. 'One is the so-called switch method, in which criminals move the drugs from one container to another to circumvent control,' said a senior Hit and Run Cargo Team official at Rotterdam's port. 'This usually concerns containers of fruits or other fresh products from Central America, where bags of drugs were placed at the port of origin. Due to the often-limited shelf life of the contents, these types of containers must quickly pass through customs, which means that criminals also have limited time to move the drugs to another container; preferably one with origin and destination within Europe because, in principle, these are not checked.'

Criminal syndicates often use minors – referred to as ninjas or runners – to extricate cocaine from containers in ports, not least since prison sentences for minors are relatively low. 'I recently had a case where four young guys were found in a container stocking 800 kilos of cocaine. They each received only two years unconditionally. For 800 kilos!' a senior Dutch police officer told the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC).²⁵

The Netherlands' financial system is crucial in the illicit economy, enabling criminals to facilitate trade and money movement.²⁶ With a large financial sector and various informal options for concealing and transferring funds, criminals can easily launder their profits.²⁷ Amsterdam, for example, is the centre of the European hawala system, an informal money transfer system that does not require record keeping and therefore leaves no trail.²⁸ *Hawala* transfers are estimated to be worth more than €10 billion per year in Amsterdam and are used extensively by criminals and terrorist movements, according to the Dutch

police.²⁹ The Amsterdam housing market also provides an opportunity to launder investments.³⁰

Because of all these factors, Dutch cities such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam and – to a lesser extent – Utrecht are serving as the physical meeting place for the international drug world. Amsterdam now has what researchers call 'a similar marketplace function' to cities like Dubai, Medellín, New York and Miami, where demand is determined, negotiations take place, and payment is made for drug transports.³¹

Western Balkans groups operating in the Netherlands

The cocaine trade between the Netherlands and the Western Balkans is dominated by Albanian and Bosnian-Croatian-Montenegrin-Serbian speaking criminal groups, who control dealing, mid-level distribution and, together with Dutch criminals, large-scale trafficking, often in collaboration with one another.³²

Criminals from Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina operate in partnership with Dutch criminals and obtain drugs through Dutch seaports and airports.³³ Besides the cocaine trade, they also smuggle synthetic drugs and traffic women whom they force to work in legalized red-light districts, including Amsterdam's popular De Wallen district.³⁴

According to a senior police operative, Balkan-based groups also deal in weapons. 'Small buses full of firearms' are frequently found by the Dutch police, most originating from Albania, Serbia and Montenegro.³⁵ The ex-Yugoslav diaspora coordinates the trade in Antwerp, Rotterdam and Luxembourg.³⁶ Additionally, in the last six years, the Western Balkan criminal networks have adopted a business model that focuses on indoor cannabis cultivation in the EU.³⁷ Criminal groups grow cannabis illegally in the Netherlands or buy Dutch expertise for cultivating it.³⁸

'They have a large presence across the Netherlands,' says a senior Dutch police spokesperson about criminal groups from the Western Balkans. 'They are very active and aggressive. Not only are they involved in retrieving the cocaine from ports like Rotterdam and transporting it across Europe, but they also run boiler-and-storage houses. Balkan criminals are known to rent so-called ghost houses in holiday parks in the south of the Netherlands from criminal real-estate agencies.' Other Balkan-based criminals come only 'to get the cocaine from the port or to liquidate someone, and then go straight back home.'³⁹

LIMITED KNOWLEDGE OF WESTERN BALKAN CRIMINAL GROUPS AMONG DUTCH LAW ENFORCEMENT

Dutch law enforcement officers reportedly often incorrectly identify the nationalities of criminals from the Western Balkans. Bosnians, Montenegrins and Serbs are frequently wrongly identified or grouped together, or even confused with Albanians. According to a senior police spokesperson, 'knowledge levels about the Balkans are too low',⁴⁰ which is why most police sources speak of 'Balkan-based groups' or even

use the derogative term 'Yugo' to describe Balkan criminals. This knowledge deficit affects the ability of law enforcement capacity to respond to the problem, and is compounded by a major staff shortage within the Dutch police. There are only two liaison officers in the Dutch police focused on the Balkans, which results in 'shoestring operations'.⁴¹

Crime organizations such as the Kavač and Škaljari – groups that have a presence in several Balkan countries – use ports like Rotterdam for their illicit narcotic shipments.⁴² The Slovenian chapter of the Kavač crime syndicate, for example, traffics drugs (cannabis and cocaine) to Slovenia from the Netherlands.⁴³

Fighting between the Kavač and Škaljari clans has, in the past, brought violence to Dutch cities.⁴⁴ In 2018, for example, a Serbian national was shot dead and another wounded in a pizza restaurant in Amsterdam West.⁴⁵ The Serbian police noted that one of the victims, who was injured but survived, was a member of the Bar-Budva gang in Serbia, which has ties with the Škaljari clan.⁴⁶

Other criminals from Serbia and Montenegro also import cocaine from Colombia, Brazil and Ecuador through Dutch ports. Serbian criminals reportedly hire Dutch and Belgian 'brokers' to retrieve their drugs from the ports and trade other substances with them.⁴⁷ Montenegrins have allegedly helped fishermen from the Dutch town of Urk smuggle cocaine on fishing barges on open waters.⁴⁸

Albanian organized crime groups also reportedly cooperate closely with Dutch, Italian and Moroccan criminal organizations and are said to play a key role in the Amsterdam and Rotterdam underworlds.⁴⁹ 'Albanian groups started at the bottom of the ladder and now have worked their way up,' confirms an experienced Dutch crime reporter. They run cocaine operations from the Netherlands, via Italy and Albania, to the Balkans and run cocaine labs in large cities like The Hague.⁵⁰

According to the police, the presence of Albanian gangs in the cannabis trade in the Netherlands increased after

a crackdown on cannabis cultivation in Albania between 2013 and 2019.⁵¹ Albanian criminals have set up cannabis plantations in residential houses in the province of Limburg,⁵² but this activity is more lucrative in Spain and the UK than in the Netherlands. They are involved in money laundering and human smuggling.⁵³ Albanian gangs also operate in Ecuador, one of the main sources of cocaine for the Netherlands.⁵⁴

Bosnian criminals have also gained a foothold in the Dutch drug trade. Originally from Sarajevo, Dutch-Bosnian national Edin Gačanin is believed to have run massive cocaine shipments from South America to Europe from his home in the Netherlands. His gang – the Tito and Dino clan – registered many companies in the Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain and Bosnia and Herzegovina to launder drug proceeds.⁵⁵ Gačanin is believed to have links with the Dutch-Moroccan mafia.⁵⁶ He was arrested in Dubai in November 2022, from where he reportedly cut a deal with a Dutch prosecutor, pleading guilty in exchange for a seven-year prison sentence in the Netherlands and a US\$1 million fine.⁵⁷

Another Bosnian-Dutch national with alleged links to the Dutch-Moroccan mafia was arrested on a Dutch extradition notice in 2022 on suspicion of trading in cocaine. He was reportedly hiding in Montenegro (a country with which Dutch authorities have no extradition treaty) and was handed over when visiting Serbia.⁵⁸ Law enforcement says Boris P, alias Picasso, received orders from Ridouan Taghi – a lynchpin of the Dutch-Moroccan mafia sentenced to a life term in February over a string of murders – from his prison cell in Vught.⁵⁹ Boris P denies all accusations.⁶⁰

Groups from North Macedonia have also used Dutch ports to receive cocaine.⁶¹ In January 2024, members of a Macedonian criminal group were arrested for involvement in transporting 435 kilograms of cocaine from Brazil to the Belgian port of Antwerp and 106 kilograms from Peru to Rotterdam.⁶²

Law enforcement operations

Law enforcement has been stepping up its efforts to disrupt organized crime in the Netherlands, including through increased international cooperation and the participation of Italian anti-mafia investigators.⁶³ A Dutch customs diving team is active in the Port of Antwerp in Belgium, and the two countries are collaborating with officials in Latin America.⁶⁴ The Netherlands and Ecuador have set up a customs treaty to tackle the drug trade from ports in Latin America.⁶⁵ As a result, Dutch customs seized around 11 000 kilograms more of cocaine in 2023 than in the previous year.⁶⁶

In recent years, law enforcement in the Western Balkans, the Netherlands and Belgium – in partnership with Eurojust and Europol – have had a significant win: they cracked Sky ECC, an encrypted communication tool favoured by criminals.⁶⁷ According to a spokesperson for Europol, the agency has ‘an Operational Taskforce ... comprising 11 countries focusing specifically on organized crime from the Western Balkans. Over 40 investigations are being developed as part of this Operational Taskforce.’⁶⁸ This increased effort across Europe has led to several arrests in the Netherlands and the Balkans.

In February 2024, 59 people in Albania, Italy, Germany and the UK were arrested for smuggling heroin, cocaine, hash and cannabis from Albania and the Netherlands to Spain and Germany. Europol said the network used cars with double bottoms and secret compartments.⁶⁹

In 2023, Europol ran an international operation that resulted in the takedown of the biggest cocaine trafficking criminal organization in the Balkan region, with several kingpins arrested in Belgrade.⁷⁰ This criminal group smuggled drugs from Colombia, Brazil, Ecuador and Aruba and was known for its violence and involvement in high-end robberies.⁷¹ Coordinated raids were carried out in Serbia, the Netherlands and Belgium, and police seized luxury cars, jewellery, explosives and weapons, including sniper rifles, automatic rifles and ammunition.⁷²

The same year, in 2023, Rotterdam police found cocaine in a garage. The seizure resulted in police action in Croatia, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to the Croatian police, the Netherlands was used as a transit hub for drugs from Turkey and Montenegro that were imported to the Netherlands, before being cut and distributed across Europe. The police confiscated machine guns, fake identity documents and police uniforms.⁷³ Also in 2023, the German, Italian and Dutch police arrested 35 Albanians involved in the large-scale trafficking of cocaine and cannabis from South America to the EU.⁷⁴ In 2022, Eurojust arrested seven members of a Serbian-led drug trafficking network in Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Serbia – 115 kilograms of cocaine was seized, found hidden in concrete panels.⁷⁵

In 2020, Rotterdam police arrested two Albanian criminals who had hidden 300 kilograms of cocaine (worth around €45 million) in their apartment.⁷⁶ In 2019, Dutch national Pier S was sentenced to 17 years in jail following his arrest in Operation Taxus.⁷⁷ His organization had used corrupt customs officials and bribed port employees in order to export drugs to the Balkans.⁷⁸ In 2019, authorities in the US city of Philadelphia seized 20 tonnes of cocaine from a

Nationality	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015
Albania	55	64	59	74	86	97	84	84	51
Bosnia and Herzegovina	13	13	14	17	20	22	20	22	23
Kosovo	<5	<5	<5	<5	<5	<5	5	7	6
Montenegro	<5	<5	<5	<5	<5	<5	<5	<5	5
North Macedonia	<5	<5	<5	<5	<5	<5	<5	<5	5
Serbia	14	12	8	15	19	17	19	23	21

FIGURE 3 Nationals from the Western Balkans currently incarcerated in Dutch prisons.

Source: Ministry of Justice and Security of the Netherlands

container ship en route to Rotterdam and arrested several Montenegrin crew members.⁷⁹

Recent police actions have shown that criminals from the Balkans operating internationally are using Dutch ports as entry points for their illicit undertakings, and are taking advantage of the country's financial systems to launder illicit proceeds. However, the law enforcement response is constrained by limited resources and a lack of expertise in identifying Balkan criminal networks. Criminals from the Western Balkans reportedly make up just 2% of the inmate population in the Netherlands (see Figure 3), with greater representation from Albania and Serbia in 2023.⁸⁰

Notes

- 1 GI-TOC, Global Organized Crime Index 2023: The Netherlands; UNODC and Europol, Cocaine insights 1, December 2021; UNODC, Global report on cocaine 2023.
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Balkan criminal groups are taking advantage of instability in Ecuador.

Positioned between two of the largest cocaine-producing countries in the world, Colombia and Peru, Ecuador has become a corridor and gateway for the shipment of cocaine to the United States and Europe. The country's main port, Guayaquil, is a departure point for large volumes of drugs. Unsurprisingly, the city is also the epicentre of drug-related violence, evident in a spate of bombings, inter-gang shootings, gruesome murders, kidnappings and extortion incidents over the past few years.

Riots triggered by overcrowding in prisons and power struggles between gangs over drug distribution have led to the deaths of hundreds of inmates in the past few years. In early January 2024, two of the country's most powerful gang leaders escaped from maximum security prisons in the space of around 24 hours, while more than 100 prison staff were being held hostage by inmates across five different jails.¹

Political instability and weak criminal justice have created a permissive environment for drug traffickers to operate in Ecuador. The country has also become a magnet for foreign criminals, notably from Mexico, Colombia, Europe and the Western Balkans. This has fuelled a market for weapons and the services of hitmen.

As a result, homicides increased by a factor of eight between 2018 and 2023. Last year was the bloodiest in the country's history, with a homicide rate of 46.5 per 100 000 inhabitants.² Seldom are the perpetrators brought to justice. Among the victims were police officers, prosecutors, mayors and presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio, who had campaigned on an anti-mafia platform and was assassinated at a rally in Quito in August 2023, less than two weeks before the elections.³

Ecuador's criminal justice bodies have been too weak to withstand this onslaught. This is reflected in the 2023 Global Organized Crime Index, which shows a major gulf



The Ecuadorian navy conducts an anti-drug trafficking operation near the port of Guayaquil, Ecuador, in March 2024.

Photo: Gerardo Menoscal/AFP via Getty Images

between Ecuador’s rising criminality score – the country is ranked 11th worst out of 193 countries – and a falling resilience score.

Recently elected president Daniel Noboa has tried to reverse this trend. In late 2023, the attorney general announced the launch of Operación Metástasis, the biggest crackdown on organized crime and corruption in the country’s history. More than 75 raids netted not only suspected offenders but also serving and former judges, police officers and other suspected enablers and informants. The explosion of violence in early January was a reaction to this chemotherapy.

A trail of blood

It is thought that much of Ecuador’s narco-violence is related to competition among local groups over who will provide protection and other services to the powerful foreign criminal groups, including those from the Western Balkans.⁴

Through violence and alliances, criminal groups from the Western Balkans have firmly entrenched themselves in the country’s criminal underworld. Local Ecuadorian gangs assist the Balkan groups with their cocaine-related activities and provide security. This helps the Balkan groups to operate with a relatively high degree of impunity while enriching and empowering the local gangs. The Balkan connection has also given Ecuadorian gangs greater access to the highly lucrative cocaine market in Europe.⁵

Corruption, intimidation and weak governance have also enabled individuals from the Western Balkans – particularly from Albania – to operate in the murky realm where crime and business intersect. For example, in

February 2024, a Europol-coordinated operation identified an Albanian businessperson who was using Ecuadorian fruit companies as a front to import significant quantities of cocaine into the EU. A total of €48 million in company assets were frozen as a result.⁶

The cocaine business has not been without its risks for traffickers from the Balkans. Over the past five years, seven people from the Western Balkans linked with drug trafficking are known to have been killed in Ecuador, and at least one has been wounded.

Potential effects of the crackdown

As a result of the gang-related violence in early 2024, the president of Ecuador has designated 22 criminal groups as ‘narco-terrorists’ and declared a state of internal armed conflict.⁷ Dozens of operations have been carried out by police and the military, targeting not only members of these groups but also their operational bases.⁸ Furthermore, since the beginning of the year, record volumes of cocaine have been seized at the country’s ports in containers bound for Europe.⁹

It is still too early to judge the efficiency and impact of the crackdown by the Ecuadorian government. However, it is safe to assume that the situation could unsettle the illicit economy from which groups from the Western Balkans have profited over the past few years.

If the government can restore order and significantly reduce the flow of cocaine into and out of the country, it is highly probable that the Western Balkan groups would partially relocate to somewhere less risky in the region. Possibilities include further growing their presence in Peru, Colombia and Brazil – either trying to infiltrate ports or making contacts with cocaine

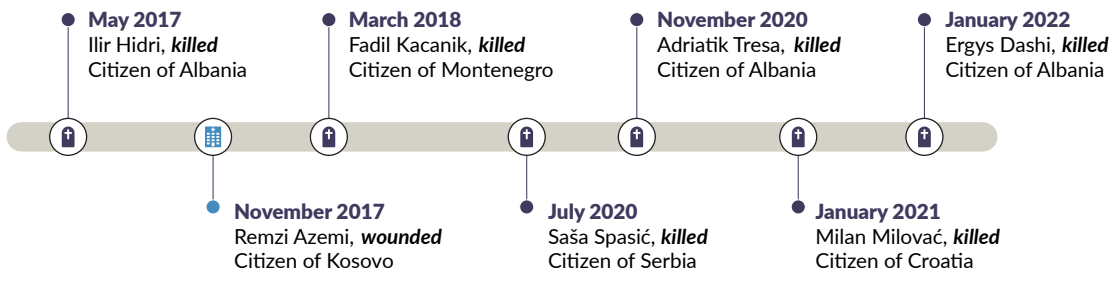


FIGURE 1 Traffickers from the Western Balkans killed or wounded in Ecuador.

Source: Data gathered from various news sources. Milan Milovać was shot in Guayaquil, Ecuador, in November 2020, but lost his life in a hospital in January 2021.

suppliers in the hinterland. It is also possible that operations could be displaced to more distant transshipment points, such as in the Caribbean or along the Atlantic coast of South America.

Key members of Albanian organized crime groups operating in Ecuador have temporarily relocated to other South American countries, such as Peru, Colombia, Bolivia, and Brazil, from where they can assess the situation from a safe distance while also taking the opportunity to expand their networks in these countries. This move serves as a contingency plan should the security situation in Ecuador remain stringent. Nonetheless, the majority of their members remain in strategic locations inside the country, such as in Guayaquil, actively navigating the current situation.¹⁰

Another scenario is that the government quells the violence but is unable to dismantle all criminal groups; in this case, the various actors would have to adapt. This could lead to new alliances or violent competition. In both cases, the survivors would need a degree of protection, which in criminal economies is usually provided by bullets or bribes. Therefore, the challenge for the Ecuadorian authorities is not just to go after criminal actors, but to shrink the opportunity space in which they operate.

A third scenario is that entrepreneurs from the Balkans lie low for a while, or relocate temporarily until the situation calms down. As the head of the GI-TOC's Andean regional office, Felipe Botero Escobar, noted:

I believe that Balkan groups will use other, less conflict-ridden ports to continue cocaine shipments to Europe, at least until things stabilize in Ecuador. In February, a month after the situation in Ecuador began to deteriorate, the UK seized cocaine that had been hidden in a shipment of bananas coming from Santa Marta in Colombia. This method bears remarkable resemblance to that used by Balkan networks in Ecuador, and Santa Marta is currently a relatively peaceful area under the control of the Gulf Clan. Although there has been no confirmation yet of Balkan involvement in this particular cocaine shipment, the operational characteristics and relationship with local criminal organizations in Santa Marta are almost identical to those in Guayaquil.¹¹

What is highly unlikely is that Balkan groups abandon Ecuador completely. They have spent almost a decade building contacts in the underworld and the upperworld and the cocaine economy is booming. The risks might be increasing, but the benefits of being close to the source of supply as well as consolidating links to lucrative retail markets in Western Europe are even higher.

That said, the attention that the crisis has generated should be used to strengthen capacity in Ecuador – for example, in ports, the criminal justice system and prison management – and to enhance international cooperation, including between law enforcement agencies in the Western Balkans and Latin America.

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Montenegrin criminal groups expand their reach into Africa.

It is well known that criminal groups from the Western Balkans are active in Latin America, smuggling cocaine to Western Europe. But there is growing evidence that regional groups, notably from Montenegro, have also made inroads into western and northern Africa, smuggling cocaine, hashish and fuel. In many cases, the same groups are involved in smuggling multiple commodities.

Over the past few years, a growing number of Montenegrins have been arrested in connection with serious organized crime, either in African waters or for trafficking drugs via African countries. In August 2018, 11 Montenegrin citizens were arrested when the *Remus*, a containership flying under the flag of Panama, was intercepted in Italian waters on suspicion of smuggling hashish. The ship had departed from the Montenegrin port of Zelenika near Herceg Novi and travelled into



FIGURE 1 The presence of Montenegrin criminals in Africa.

Moroccan waters, where the drugs were loaded.¹ On the ship's return to Europe, Italian police seized 20 tonnes of hashish.² The individuals were alleged to have links to Montenegro's Škaljari organized crime clan.³ During the same month, Montenegrin citizens were found to be involved in smuggling fuel from Libya.⁴

In intercepted conversations on the Sky ECC messaging platform from September 2020 to March 2021, members of the Kavač clan, a notorious group that rivals the Škaljari, discussed their connections in Senegal and Sierra Leone, where they are alleged to rent houses and other spaces on the coast. The conversations revealed that cocaine from South America is off-loaded from cargo vessels onto smaller boats that make stops near the ports of African states. The drugs are transported to the shoreline by fishing boats.⁵ Messages reveal that in addition to renting fishing boats and speedboats, clan members discussed the possibility of renting aircraft to fly drugs across the African continent to additional transit destinations, including Zambia, for onward movement to Montenegro, Western Europe and Australia.

In April 2022, police in Cape Verde intercepted a fishing boat from Brazil and seized 5 668 kilograms of cocaine.⁶ Among those arrested were two Montenegrins who were later convicted.⁷ In 2023, the Montenegrin special prosecutor's office highlighted that on several occasions, the Kavač clan had trafficked cocaine from South America to Western Europe via Africa.⁸

The question could be asked, why Montenegrins? The coastal country has a long-standing maritime tradition and a large number of merchant seamen, whom the Kavač and Škaljari clans lure into their orbit. As a result, a disproportionate number of sailors from Montenegro

have been arrested in major cocaine busts, including in African waters. Indeed, over 30 tonnes of cocaine worldwide were seized between 2017 and 2021 in cases linked to Montenegrin criminals.⁹

Criminal entrepreneurs seek the paths of least resistance. According to a special police department investigating the activities of Montenegrin criminal groups, they target African countries in part due to a perception that cargo faces less scrutiny by law enforcement during transportation from Africa to Europe than direct routes from South America.¹⁰ Dritan Abazović, until recently prime minister of Montenegro and a former head of the national security council, notes that African countries are favoured as transit points because of low costs and poor local oversight. 'It's more cost-effective to bribe officials at African ports than in Spain, and there is less scrutiny by security agencies,' he told the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC).¹¹

The links to Africa have only recently caught the attention of Montenegrin security agencies; in the past, Montenegrin traffickers were believed to be more involved with drug and cigarette smuggling in the Middle East than in Africa.¹² This oversight is evident in both directions. According to Montenegro's justice ministry, there have been no requests for international legal assistance from any African countries.¹³

Furthermore, there is limited cooperation between Montenegrin law enforcement and counterparts in Africa. Most collaboration takes place among European law enforcement agencies, primarily through Europol's Operational Taskforce Balkan Cartel, established in July 2020,¹⁴ or through bilateral cooperation with



Stills from a video showing the seizure of hashish from the *Remus* in 2018.
Source: *La Repubblica*

counterparts in Western Europe, such as France.¹⁵ This cooperation has yielded some success in African waters. For example, in 2020, a joint operation between Montenegrin police and Europol thwarted the trafficking of 411 kilograms of cocaine off the coast of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire.¹⁶

There are allegations that some criminals from the Western Balkans, including Montenegro, hide out in Africa.¹⁷ For example, Darko Šarić, a Montenegrin native convicted in Serbia for cocaine smuggling, reportedly hid in South Africa back in 2012 when a warrant was issued against him. Media reports also suggest that contacts, including a local police general, assisted Kavač clan leader Radoje Zvicer in hiding out in South Africa temporarily in 2021.¹⁸ In 2013, Anton Stanaj, who originated from Podgorica and had been sentenced to six and a half years in prison in Belgrade for cigarette smuggling, was killed in Sudan – not a typical tourist destination.¹⁹ However, as a GI-TOC senior analyst noted, 'despite historical links existing between criminals from Montenegro and South Africa,

there is no current evidence indicating their active involvement in local or foreign drug trafficking networks, such as those from Bulgaria, Nigeria and Pakistan. Information regarding Montenegrin criminal involvement has been scarce since 2018.²⁰

The expansion of Montenegrin and other Balkan criminal groups into Africa is a significant shift in the landscape of transnational organized crime. Going forward, Abazović points to concerns that individuals with illicit funds will redirect part of their investments from the Middle East to Africa.²¹ As Balkan criminal groups go global, law enforcement must follow. This requires closer cooperation between national law enforcement and Europol and Interpol as well as coordination between European and African law enforcement, involving Europol and Afripol, and between the Southeast European Law Enforcement Center and the Economic Community of West African States. The main focus should be on enhancing maritime security and joint financial investigations as well as facilitating access to information on wanted persons.

Notes

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The Western Balkans is still the criminals' choice for weapons.

In the late 1990s and in the early 21st century, there was considerable attention focused on small arms and light weapons in the Western Balkans due to the legacy of conflicts in the former Yugoslavia and unrest in Albania. While the international community's attention has since been drawn away by new conflicts erupting elsewhere, the region remains awash with weapons, feeding into violence both at home and abroad.

Several atrocities within the last year have provoked outrage in the region. In August 2023, a man live-streamed himself on Instagram murdering his ex-wife and two other people in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹ Three months earlier, Serbia was rocked by two shootings within 48 hours that left 18 dead. The first, on 3 May, involved a seventh-grader who killed eight students and a security guard at a Belgrade school; a critically wounded girl died days later. On 4 May, eight more people were killed in attacks in villages south of Belgrade, carried out by a 21-year-old man with an arsenal of illegal firearms.²

The 2023 Global Organized Crime Index shows that arms trafficking involving the six Western Balkan countries remains higher than in Europe as a whole; the

region scores 5.42 compared to a European average of 4.60 out of 10, with 10 being the highest level of criminality.³ While legacy weapons from the conflicts of the 1990s remain a threat, and people in the region tend to keep them as a hedge against future instability, new trends are emerging, ranging from highly organized criminal groups seeking high-powered weapons to the conversion of gas pistols into lethal weapons.

Criminals and civilians alike continue to have access to small arms and light weapons, as well as assault rifles and grenades. This increases the risk of accidents and homicides.⁴

According to analysis by the Armed Violence Monitoring Platform of the South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC), the number of armed incidents related to organized crime nearly tripled in this region from 49 to 134 between 2019 and 2022.⁵ The SecuriMeter 2022 Public Opinion Survey on Security highlighted the increasing number of shooting incidents and seizures of firearms across the region, while also pointing to the threat posed by poly-criminality, namely how illegal firearms fuel violence and are linked to other

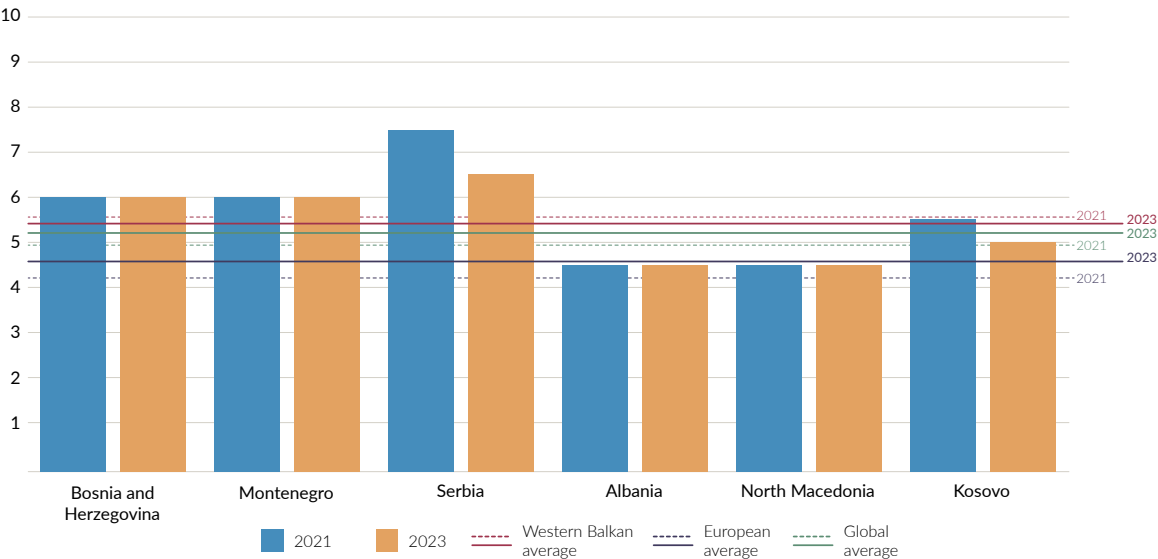


FIGURE 1 Arms trafficking scores, according to the Global Organized Crime Index, 2021 and 2023.

Note: Scores are out of 10, with a higher score representing a higher prevalence of arms trafficking.

criminal markets such as human trafficking and the smuggling of migrants, drugs and tobacco.⁶

The availability of illegal firearms in the Balkans has security implications far beyond the region. Weapons used in terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015 and Vienna in November 2020 were traced back to the Balkans,⁷ while weapons and grenades from the region are fuelling gang violence in Sweden.⁸ Explosives, anti-tank rocket-propelled grenade launchers and anti-personnel mines from the Western Balkans are available on the black market and turn up in conflict zones around the world.⁹

A second trend is the desire of criminals from the Balkans to acquire more powerful weapons, particularly from the West. This includes the latest brands of pistols, such as Heckler & Koch, Beretta, Glock, Sig Sauer, Walther and Colt,¹⁰ but also high-powered assault rifles. These weapons are usually obtained in small quantities and act more as status symbols or even collectors' items than as part of an arsenal. Nevertheless, they can also fuel an arms race between feuding groups, as witnessed in the ongoing conflict between the Kavač and Škaljari, two Montenegrin clans. Although Western pistols are

desirable, supply dictates that the highest demand is for locally made pistols such as the Serbian-manufactured Zastava CZ and Zastava M57 Tetejac, as well as the automatic pistol Zastava M84 Scorpion, which are used in most organized crime-related homicides in Montenegro.¹¹ However, an indictment by the Special State Prosecutor's Office of Montenegro against members of the Kavač clan listed a range of other weapons seized from the group, including Beretta and Česká Zbrojovka pistols, Smith and Wesson revolvers, and a Heckler & Koch rifle.¹²

A third trend is the conversion of gas and alarm guns (non-lethal weapons designed for self-protection, sporting or other purposes) into weapons that can fire real bullets. The conversion of relatively cheap weapons, often originating in Turkey, enables dealers to sell the doctored firearms for as much as 10 times the original price.¹³ Such weapons are particularly popular among juvenile offenders since they are cheap but convey an image of toughness. They are sold on the black market and are of growing concern to police.¹⁴ Several illegal factories for modifying weapons have been found in the region, including in a village close to Tirana, Albania, in



Kosovo police officers display weapons and military equipment seized in the village of Banjska, in Mitrovica in September 2023.

Photo: Armend Nimani/AFP via Getty Images

June 2022, and in the municipality of Stolac in Bosnia and Herzegovina in January 2021.¹⁵

There is also significant smuggling of weapons within the region. Previously, illicit firearms were mainly smuggled from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Montenegro and Croatia, but now smuggling is carried out in both directions, partly because of growing instability in Bosnia.¹⁶ On 6 January 2024, officials from the Serbian Customs Administration at the Merdare border crossing seized 45 firearms with silencers and ammunition from a passenger vehicle coming from Pristina.¹⁷

It is worth noting that despite the massive inflow of weapons into Ukraine and the potential diversion of some legal stocks to the illicit market, the Western Balkans remains the main source of illegal weapons in Europe. At present, weapons in the Western Balkans are still cheap and plentiful, and regional stockpiles have been augmented by inward flows from Turkey via Bulgaria, especially of gas or alarm guns. There has been

little change in prices for weapons on the black market in the Balkans since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.¹⁸

This raises the question of what will happen after the war in Ukraine – a theme that the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) explores in a forthcoming report on trends in arms trafficking from the Ukraine conflict. Will Ukraine replace the Western Balkans as a principal source of illegal weapons or will the trafficking infrastructure that has been created by Balkan players over the past three decades potentially be used to smuggle weapons from Ukraine to Western Europe and Scandinavia? Another potential route for large volumes of weapons could be the maritime route from Odesa, which was a hub for arms trafficking before the Russian invasion. In this postwar scenario, larger batches of weapons would be sent along the newly restored shipping route along the western edge of the Black Sea, before entering the EU via Bulgaria, or even via Romania into the Danube.

Notes

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Serbian police crackdown disrupts smuggling of migrants, but for how long?

Since mid-2022, groups involved in the smuggling of migrants from Serbia to EU member state Hungary have become increasingly violent. At least 10 armed clashes between Afghan and Moroccan smugglers were reported between mid-2022 and late 2023 near the border fence between Serbia and Hungary, involving automatic weapons.¹ This triggered outrage on both sides of the border,² as well as a blame game between Hungary and Serbia,³ and even claims by Budapest that the Taliban had links to Afghan groups operating in the border area.⁴

The situation peaked in October 2023 with the killing of three Afghans near the village of Horgoš.⁵ With parliamentary elections looming in Serbia (in December 2023) and pressure increasing from the EU to take action,⁶ Serbian authorities cracked down on smugglers.⁷ Indeed, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić even warned Bratislav Gašić, his interior minister and a

close political ally, that he would send in the army if the police could not solve the situation.⁸

The border between Serbia and Hungary, while heavily guarded and protected by fences, has been a popular route among migrants trying to enter the EU and therefore a lucrative hub for traffickers. Conflict, poverty and instability in many parts of the world have led to a steady stream of people on the move through the Western Balkans, albeit below the dramatic numbers of 2015/16. In 2023, the EU border agency Frontex detected almost 100 000 irregular border crossings to the EU through the Western Balkan route.⁹

In the fourth quarter of 2023, Serbian police carried out a series of raids to drive out traffickers. More than 800 officers were involved, including anti-terrorism units and the gendarmerie. These forces deployed drones, helicopters and combat vehicles,¹⁰ in what amounted to



A closed crossing point at the Hungarian border with Serbia near the village of Horgoš. The smuggling of migrants to Hungary has become increasingly violent.

Photo: Armend Nimani/AFP via Getty Images

the biggest police operation in Serbia since the crackdown on organized crime that followed the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić in 2003.¹¹

Serbian police secured smuggling entry and exit points throughout the country. They formed four headquarters: in Subotica in the north of the country; in Dimitrovgrad in the east near the border with Bulgaria; in Preševo, a town in the south near the border with North Macedonia; and in Mali Zvornik at the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹²

As a result of the police operation, the informal 'bases' of armed smuggling gangs in border areas have been dismantled and there have been no reports of subsequent armed clashes. In the operation, police rounded up approximately 4 500 migrants.¹³ Additionally, they arrested eight smugglers and 119 individuals on charges related to human trafficking and illegal possession of weapons and drugs, and confiscated automatic rifles, pistols, ammunition, passports and drugs.¹⁴

Furthermore, police took control of state-run migrant camps (supplanting the commissariat for refugees and migrants)¹⁵ and closed several such camps, including in Sombor and Subotica, both near the Hungarian border; Kikinda, snug to the Romanian frontier; and in Adaševci and Principovac, close to the border with Croatia. These closures worsened conditions at the camps that remain open, by causing overcrowding.¹⁶ In addition to the dire humanitarian situation, there have been reports of human rights abuses by police against refugees and migrants.¹⁷

Smuggling routes shift west to Bosnia and Herzegovina

There are three main routes for smuggling migrants into Serbia. The main entry points are in the south-west around the Raška region, in the south through North Macedonia and in the east from Bulgaria. In February 2024, 35% of migrants entered Serbia from Bulgaria, while over half (53%) came from North Macedonia.¹⁸ Owing to the police crackdown close to Hungary's border, most of the onward flows now head towards Bosnia and Herzegovina. Most migrants subsequently travel to Sarajevo and then proceed to Bihać or Velika Kladuša, aiming to cross the border into Croatia.¹⁹ Germany, Italy and France are the top three intended countries for migrants, although the final destination depends on the nationality of the migrant.²⁰

While the police operation appears to have been successful in dismantling several smuggling groups or networks, it has not stopped the flow of refugees and migrants. Rather, it has redirected the movement of people.²¹ In February 2024, in response to inquiries about their next destinations, the majority (82%) of migrants in Serbia indicated Bosnia and Herzegovina; 9% expressed plans to travel to Hungary, and another 7% intended to go directly from Serbia to Croatia.²² Previously, in 2022, migrants attempted to leave Serbia primarily at the northern borders with Hungary.²³

For all smuggling routes, the capital city Belgrade is a hub. Along the south-west route, migrants tend to move from the towns of Tutin and Sjenica, where the migrant camps are still active, towards Bosnia and Herzegovina or to Belgrade as an initial port of call. In terms of onwards movement towards the EU, Priboj, at the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina, has become one of the main crossing points.²⁴ Migrants entering Serbia from North Macedonia, after coming to Preševo, are redirected to Belgrade. Migrants arriving from the east, from Pirot and Dimitrovgrad, bordering Bulgaria, are also directed to Belgrade.

It is reported that Belgrade has become a hub not just for refugees and migrants, but also for traffickers.²⁵ Unlike the border regions, which are now under scrutiny, a big city enables bosses to hide out with relative anonymity. 'Belgrade is the main place now because it is a crossroads and a giant city, with many stash houses and places to hide,' said a taxi driver familiar with the smuggling trade.²⁶

The shift in routes has increased pressure on the police and border guards on both sides of the border between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as coinciding with a proliferation of reports of police brutality and violent pushbacks.²⁷ Further downstream on this smuggling route, Croatian police were shot at from territory in Bosnia and Herzegovina after they thwarted a group of migrants who attempted to cross the border and enter Croatia illegally in September 2023.²⁸ Police in Bosnia and Herzegovina have conducted several actions that seek to target alleged Afghan criminals who appear to have shifted their operations from Serbia after the police crackdown.²⁹

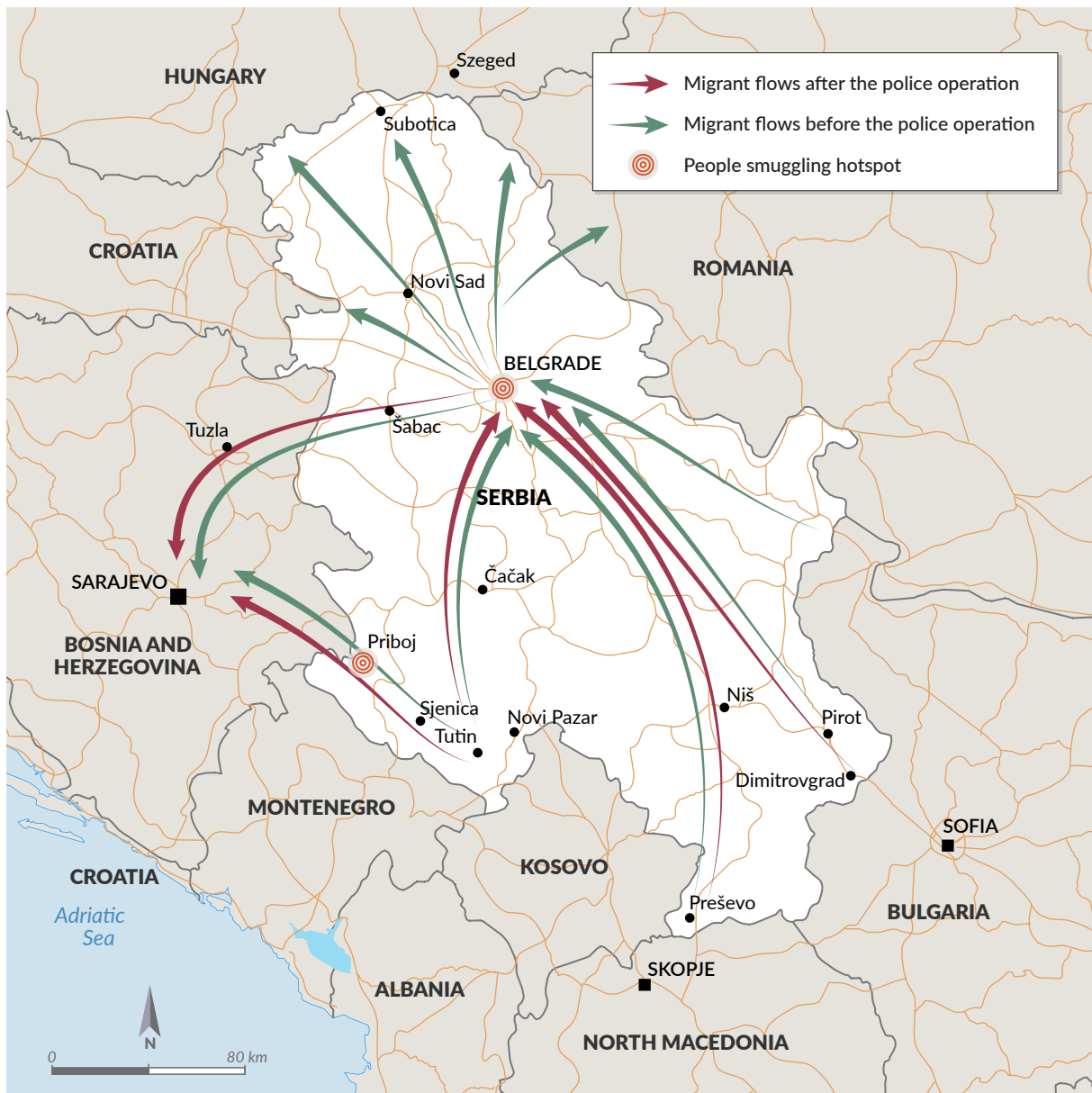


FIGURE 1 People smuggling routes in Serbia before and after police intervention.

This increased flow of refugees and migrants entering Bosnia and Herzegovina from Serbia adds to what had already been a growing number of people on the move through the country in the past few years, many of whom are being caught by the police. In 2023, police in Bosnia and Herzegovina apprehended 34 409 migrants, up from 27 429 in 2022, according to official police data. This exceeds the previous record high of 29 302 migrants caught in 2019.³⁰ In January 2024, police stopped 2 507 migrants.

The crackdown by Serbian police has shaken up the market in other ways. Prices charged by smugglers to cross from Serbia into Bosnia have increased from €200 to €500 since the route to the north has become less

attractive. In Serbia, ‘packages’ to Austria cost around €2 000, while they cost €2 500 or €3 000 to Germany.³¹ But these figures are now more negotiable as the number of people willing to engage in dangerous travel has reduced. Modalities have also changed. Since police targeted taxi associations, which are now mostly out of the trade, smugglers have returned to using mostly vans and trucks.³²

Going back north in the spring?

While the northern route has been disrupted, smugglers predict a revival in the spring. ‘Everything is generally slow until Ramadan. People are in Turkey now. But after Ramadan, people will start coming,’ one of the smugglers explained.³³ A taxi driver involved in smuggling noted

that 'in the spring, the business will be on again' in the north of Serbia, adding that his sources expect the camps in Sombor and Subotica to reopen.

Indeed, there are indications that some smugglers are moving back to their old domain. One Afghan group is active in Horgoš close to the Hungarian border, while Moroccans have returned to their regular location near Srpski Krstur and Martonoš, settlements near the Tisa River.³⁴ Afghan traffickers have also been spotted in Šid, a city near the Croatian border.³⁵

Therefore, while Serbian police have curbed smuggling-related violence, they have not been able to stop the flow of refugees and migrants, nor has the infrastructure of enablers in EU countries (such as Hungary and Austria) been dismantled.³⁶ This points to the need for greater regional cooperation – since cracking down on the market in one country simply displaces it to another country – in this case, Bosnia and Herzegovina. The situation also necessitates closer coordination and solidarity between Western Balkan countries and their EU neighbours, such as Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Greece and Romania, while ensuring the safety of migrants and upholding their human rights.

Notes

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